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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by SecurityWomen, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

SecurityWomen, an advocacy and research organisation calling for the inclusion of women in security sector reform around the world, welcomes the focus of the Commission on the Status of Women on accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective.

As an organisation whose mission is to promote the inclusion of women in security sector institutions, we would like to draw the Commission's attention to the importance of increasing women's participation and employment in the security sector to 50 per cent and the impact that full commitment to this goal could have for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. We believe that this is an essential tool in the fight to reduce and eliminate poverty, while also serving as a great example of strengthening institutions by introducing a gender perspective.

SecurityWomen recognises the complexity of poverty and the diversity and urgency of the response required to eradicate extreme poverty in all its manifestations by the year 2030, in line with goal one of the Sustainable Development Goals. Unfortunately, reaching this goal seems increasingly unlikely with progress delayed as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic, and ongoing humanitarian crises in countries around the world. While the causes of poverty are multi-faceted, inequality, high unemployment and conflict are some of the main contributing factors.

We are greatly concerned that it is women and girls who remain disproportionately impacted by poverty. Deep-rooted gender inequality and discrimination in both the public and private sectors around the world make it increasingly difficult for women to effectively leave situations of poverty. As such, any efforts to address poverty must also address gender inequality, and similarly, efforts to improve gender equality must include those living in poverty.

At SecurityWomen, we believe that by increasing the participation, and opportunities to participate, for women in security sector forces, member states can effectively contribute to the elimination of poverty and the realisation of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

Firstly, security sector forces, both nationally and within UN peacekeeping, are uniquely positioned to interact with and reach out to communities living in poverty, reducing the social exclusion that is both a cause and effect of poverty.

As such, it is imperative that these officers have the best possible chance of creating, and building connections with individuals and whole communities. The only way to ensure that this is the case, is to have forces that are representative of the communities they serve. While women can perform the same functions as male counter-parts, they can as well connect to those who may otherwise be excluded, most notably women and girls.

For those in poverty, this could be the key to re-creating ties that can help to alleviate the causes and effects of poverty. It is therefore, crucial that the security institutions trusted to protect communities, both nationally and internationally, are inclusive and approachable.

In addition, for young girls and adult women alike, seeing themselves represented in those who are there to protect and serve them, is an opportunity for empowerment. With gender inequality often a cause of poverty, witnessing women in positions of authority and power could help to erode the pre-conceived ideas about what the future may hold for women and girls.

Security forces must serve all, and by increasing the participation of women from diverse communities, they will be better positioned to act for, and with, all communities.

Second, with high levels of unemployment being another contributory factor to poverty, and even more so for women, by taking concrete efforts to increase the recruitment and participation of women in the security sector to 50 per cent, new avenues of potential income for women could be the key to leaving poverty behind.

The security sector is currently heavily male dominated, with an estimated 97 per cent of security actors being men. States must take action to make this sector more equal, opening up jobs to women who may have never considered the sector before, and in the process improving the ability of the sector to respond to the needs of all. This extends beyond the typical security institutions of the military and police, to include intelligence forces, peacekeeping forces, private security, and cyber security. Increasing the accessibility of these industries, be that through increased awareness and publicity or a focus on education and technological training, could offer women and girls living in poverty opportunities that had previously felt closed off to them.

Increasing women's participation in security forces, such as the military, will also have an important impact on one of the major causes of poverty – conflict. By increasing women's representation in military roles at all ranks, it is hoped that the masculine associations of militarism which prioritise the use of force and the classification of women as victims, will begin to erode. Diversifying the voices that are involved in discussions at the highest levels in defence decisions is an important step in reducing conflict and the extreme levels of violence that are associated with it.

In addition, women's participation in peacekeeping and the creation of the successful outcomes of peace talks has been linked to increased stability and longer-lasting peace. As such, by taking the recruitment of women into military and police forces, and subsequently peacekeeping forces, will contribute to the creation of a more peaceful world.

However, despite the benefits of increasing women's participation in security sector institutions and their potential to help address poverty, member states must take action to ensure that these institutions are safe and open places for women. These changes can only occur if these organisations incorporate a gender perspective into all aspects of their operations and assign the appropriate finances to ensure these improvements take place.

Because the security sector has been an industry dominated by men, patriarchal and misogynistic ideas have been built into their foundation. At SecurityWomen, we have been dismayed by recent reports of sexual violence and gender-based discrimination within forces around the world, including sadly some UN Peacekeeping operations. States must take these reports seriously and take action to address the underlying culture that makes these forces unsafe places for women to work. This is essential, not only for enabling women's participation, but also in ensuring that these forces are trusted by the communities they are supposed to serve.

In addition, states must take action to reduce the physical and practical barriers preventing women from participating in the security sector. This includes ensuring the provision of uniform that fits and protects women, building separate facilities at bases for use by women, adapting fitness requirements in recruitment, and reducing the barriers faced by serving women who decide to have families. Women must have the ability to participate in the security sector on equal-footing with their male counterparts, and this will require the incorporation of a gender perspective into all aspects of day-to-day operations to ensure the removal of barriers preventing this.

SecurityWomen recognises that ensuring the equal participation of women in security sector roles, and security sector reform, has the potential to alleviate poverty for women and girls and is crucial in the acceleration of the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

We take this opportunity to call on member states and stakeholders to:

- Prepare, finance, and implement, National Actions Plans focused on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, with a focus on efforts to increase the participation of women in security sector forces and at all levels of decision-making to 50 per cent.
- Ensure the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, and all following resolutions within the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
- Fully engage with the United Nation's Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy and abide by commitments to increase the participation of women in international peacekeeping.
- Take action to increase the recruitment of women into national security forces, eliminating any barriers that prevent their meaningful participation.
- Investigate, address, and take steps to eliminate the presence of patriarchal cultures within security institutions.
